

# currents FOOD

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recipes



Executive chef Trey Foshee has added Butternut Squash Risotto to the menu at Georges California Modern in La Jolla. *John R. McCutchen / Union-Tribune photos*



Foshee quietly offered his new vegetarian menu, including this Farro Risotto, alongside his regular menu, but took no pains to hype it. Still, the orders trickled in.

## Vegetables make grand entree

Local chefs catering to a rising interest in non-meat choices on fine-dining menus

By Caroline Dipping  
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For all of San Diego's cred as a farm-to-fork, sustainable, seasonally driven dining town, eating out as an honest-to-goodness, card-carrying vegetarian can sometimes be pretty hard to swallow. The pickings become more meager still if an elegant atmosphere with haute cuisine is in order.

A few months back, executive chef Trey Foshee of George's California Modern unveiled a vegetarian menu alongside his seasonal offerings. This was no halfhearted stab at meatless cuisine with just an uninspired steamed veggie plate or a slapdash pasta, but rather a thoughtful, tasteful roster complete with starters, entrees and vegan options.

Chestnut-Ricotta Ravioli with Kabocha Squash, Sage and Truffle Parmesan Fondue. Fried California Avocado, a fanned composition of light half-moons fried tempura style and accompanied by a dusting of crushed corn nuts, citrusy cabbage salad and spicy aioli. Hearty Farro to mingling with grilled portobello mushrooms, onion confit, garlic-parsley cream and topped with a perfectly poached egg.

Foshee began noodling over the idea of a high-end vegetarian menu a year after conducting a series of Side Table events in George's bar. The vegetarian-themed Side Table was the one event that sold out both nights it was offered.

SEE Vegetables, E 3



## VEGETABLES

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"I met a couple who told me they love going out to dine and enjoy a good bottle of wine, but they feel, as vegetarians, they are alienated from a lot of special events restaurants hold, such as Cooks Confab," said Foshee, referring to the local chefs group that gathers throughout the year to create meals centered on a theme or central ingredient. "Nothing is geared toward vegetarians. In a lot of ways, it is geared to the extreme."

As an exercise, Foshee took home his menu prep list and challenged himself to build as many vegetarian dishes from it as he could. He was surprised at the outcome.

"I thought, 'Geez, we are already prepping all this stuff.' Since our (regular) menu revolves around the vegetable aspect of a dish anyway, I was able to create a menu without adding a whole other layer of work onto it."

"A lot of our dishes are built that way, from the vegetable up, rather than from the protein on," Foshee said. "I thought maybe we could do it."

The reality of busy restaurant service is that a vegetarian is lucky if the chef does much more than omit the meat component from a dish or assign a line cook the task of coming up with a veg plate.

For the first month and a half, Foshee quietly offered his new menu alongside his regular menu, but took no pains to hype it. This soft introduction was due partly to his and partner George Hauer's concern that George's established clientele might think the restau-

rant was going all vegetarian.

But the orders trickled in. Appetizer, soup and salad orders were going down while the vegetarian items were going up.

Andrew Spurgin, executive director of Waters Fine Catering and a founding chef of the Cooks Confab, said he knows of no other restaurant in San Diego offering vegetarian cuisine at the level Foshee is, but he feels the tide is turning.

"I can tell you that just this morning, I wrote four different vegetarian menus for clients," Spurgin said. "I've absolutely never seen so much of the vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free interest as I have recently."

"I've really noticed this quantum shift in the last two years, this tipping point of people wanting local, regional, sustainable, all those words that have sadly been beaten to death. People are taking more of a vested interest in where their food is coming from and what they are eating."

The suppliers for Foshee's vegetarian menu are the same as those for his meat-laden menu. Revered outfits include Chino Farms, Crows Pass, Specialty Produce.

Because vernal produce is so fleeting — with sweet peas at their peak for just a couple of weeks or the short window that ramps are available — Foshee promises the spring menu will change frequently.

"The menu changes when it needs to change," he said. "When an ingredient goes out of season or I get tired or bored of doing it, the menu changes."

"I find myself looking more and more at vegetable preparations specifically and having those influence my nonvegetarian items," he said. "I keep toying with it."